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Ryerson, Egerton.

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SKETCH
OF
THE REVEREND
DOCTOR RYERSON.

BY

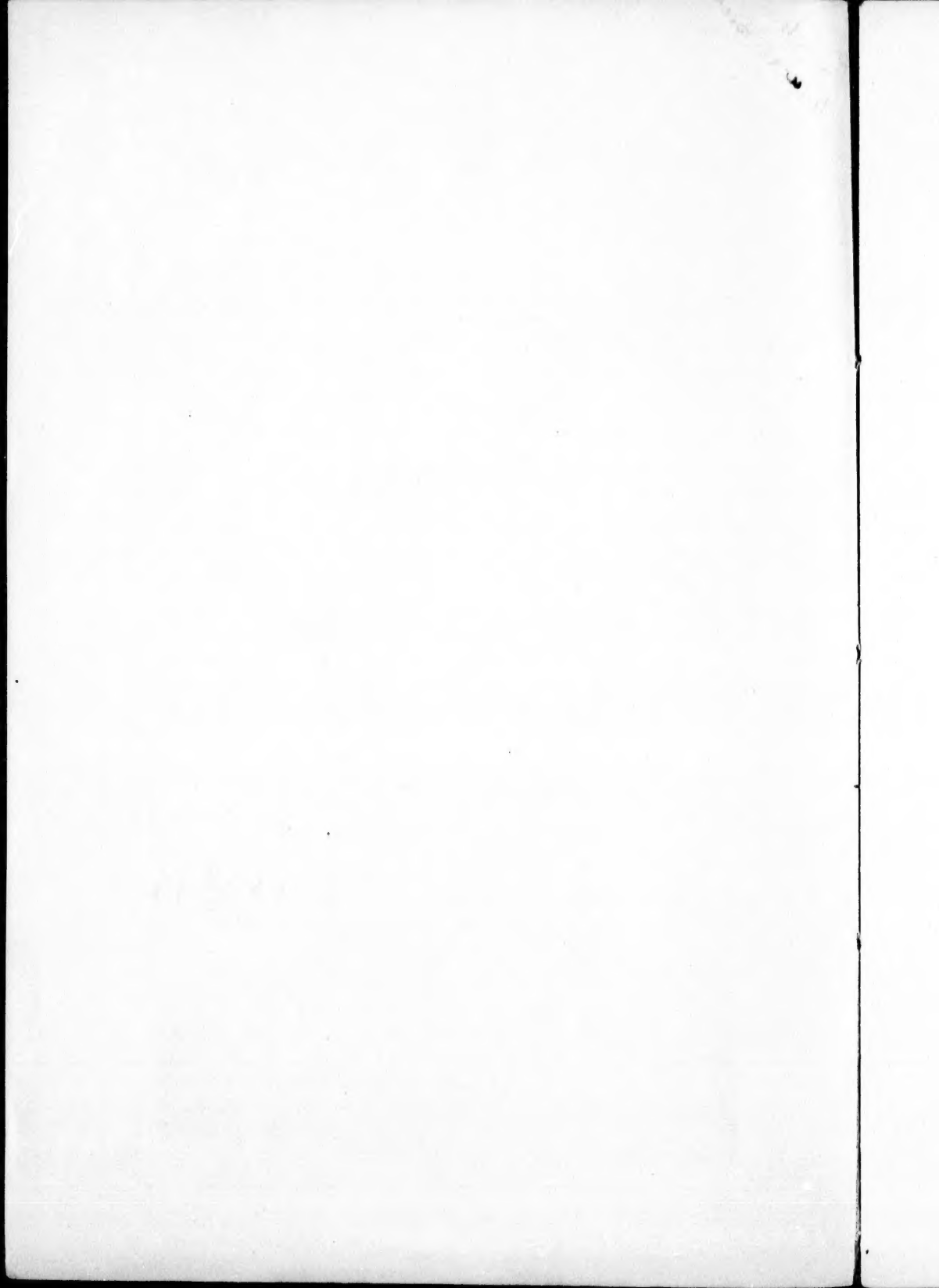
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A paper read by Dr. J. George Hodgins, at the ceremony of unveiling
the portraits of the Revs. Dr. Ryerson and Dr. Nelles,
at Victoria University, 13th June, 1894.







THE REV. DR. EGERTON RYERSON.

THE REVEREND DOCTOR RYERSON.

THE memories of great and noble men are a rich heritage to those who remain after they are gone. But it is no less true, that the waters of Lethe, alas, too soon pass over the memories, as well as the deeds, of even our greatest men. Who now speaks of our first Governor Simcoe; or, with intelligent appreciation, of Lord Elgin, our accomplished constitutional Governor-General; or of Sir John Beverley Robinson, or Robert Baldwin, as jurists and statesmen; for, to none of them has a single patriotic stone been raised, or a public memorial erected, to perpetuate their names and memory in "this Canada of ours." Yet truer sons to all her higher interests, and in their respective spheres, this Dominion has never known.

We have sought of later years to rescue from oblivion the names and deeds and memories of some of our most noted men, by erecting statues of them in the open air, and in the broad daylight, so that all may see the forms of those who have "deserved well of their country." Conspicuous among these is the statue of the subject of this sketch.

Having now been fifty years in the public service, and all of that time in connection with one of the most important departments of the Government, I have necessarily come in contact with many of our foremost public men, and noted strangers. Such a prolonged experience naturally enables one to estimate men and things by a standard of comparison, more or less high, as the years go by. That experience, and the moderating influence on opinion of time and distance, enables me to look the more dispassionately at the man we honour to-night, and at every side of his character. For his was indeed many-sided. No man, to my mind, better illustrated what may be termed the "evolution of character"—of early training and discipline—than did Dr. Ryerson.

As a youth, he was subject to many impulses, guided and controlled, as they were, by a Mother's loving hand. To her, he states, that he was "principally indebted for any studious habits,

mental energy, or even capacity, or decision of character." From her, too, came religious instruction, "poured into his mind in childhood (as he said) by a mother's counsels, and infused into his heart by a mother's prayers and tears." When first under the influence of an awakened conscience, he became an ascetic, almost as pronounced in his methods of mental self-mortification as the veriest Trappist, with whose severe discipline Wesley himself was somewhat enamoured. When duty, however, called the youthful Egerton back to his father's farm, he obeyed "for the honour of religion," as he said; and in that spirit, he tells us, he "ploughed every acre of ground for the season, cradled every stalk of wheat, rye and oats, and mowed every spear of grass, pitched the whole, first on a waggon, and then from the waggon onto the hay-mow, or stack." While the neighbours were astonished at one man doing so much work, he said: "I neither felt fatigue nor depression, for the joy of the Lord was my strength."

Then, as usher, or master, in his gifted Brother's school, and as missionary and farm-instructor to the Indians at the Credit, in 1826, you see the same zeal, the same self-sacrifice and devotion to duty—never flinching and never holding back.

Again, as the higher calls of the ministry required him to apply himself to acquire the necessary knowledge, he entered into that practical school of itinerancy, so noted in the history of the early Methodist preachers, and so celebrated in producing noble and heroic men in the early days of Methodism in this country.

And here I would pay a willing tribute, from my own experience, to the self-denying labours of these devoted men—the early Methodist preachers. It is now over sixty years (1833) since I left my father's house, in Dublin, to settle in the backwoods—first near London and afterwards in Trafalgar. The years which I spent there are fragrant with many memories, and with pleasant associations of primitive farm life. And no less so, for the tender recollections of the simple services in school-houses in humble homes, or around the fires of the undisturbed camp-meeting in the woods. My own strong conviction is that the debt which Canada owes to the early Methodist preachers, to the single-hearted exhorters and class-leaders, as well as the devoted Presbyterians and Baptists, who come later into the field, can never be repaid. To them is this country indebted for keeping alive, in those early days, the deep religious feeling and devotion which they themselves had created and developed.

In Dr. Ryerson's case, the contact with the writings of Wesley, of Blair, of Fletcher, and also of Blackstone, Locke and Paley, in that silent, thoughtful study, for which the long round of the

circuit gave such ample opportunity, implanted in his very nature those germs of noble and lofty views of constitutional and religious freedom, which soon had a wider field for their development.

No man's mental career and experience, however, more clearly demonstrated the truth of the trite adage that "there is no royal road to learning," than did Dr. Ryerson's. It was a long, toilsome, and upward road to him, during the first twenty years of his life. He had little more than reached that age, when he first crossed swords with the then foremost champion of the exclusive claims of one Church to civil and religious rights in Upper Canada.

And here, a slight historical digression will enable us to see that what this youthful writer undertook, in the crusade on which he had so courageously entered, was a much more serious matter than men of to-day are generally aware of.

The grievance complained of originated twelve years before Dr. Ryerson was born. It was embedded in the very Constitution of Upper Canada in 1791. The germ of that whole after evil took root then; and, by the time that that evil was grappled with by Dr. Ryerson and others, between thirty and forty years had passed by, and it had acquired strength and power, so that it took as many more years of anxious toil and labour, as well as successive assaults and active fighting, before the contest was brought to a successful close.

Simcoe, our first Governor, was one of the most enlightened of his contemporaries, in regard to the more practical and material parts of his duty as Governor. Yet he always seemed to be haunted with a vague fear of "sectaries" gaining a foothold in this Province. According to his idea of colonial government, the Church and the State should be united; and, to accomplish this, he bent all his energies, after he came to Upper Canada. Even before he came among us as Governor, he had formulated his own theory as to what civil and religious form his own colonial government should take. As a member of the British Parliament, before he took office under the Constitutional Act of 1791, which he had helped to pass, he had an opportunity of expressing his views, and of maintaining his theory of colonial government in the House of Commons. To him, and to the members who sympathized with his views, were we indebted for what afterwards proved to be an unjust and unfortunate provision in the Constitutional Act of 1791, "for the support of a Protestant clergy," and for the endowment of Church of England parishes in Upper Canada,—a provision which, for more than half a century, was the unceasing cause of bitter strife and heart-burning in this Province.

During, and after his time, the Church of England was always officially spoken of as the "Established Church of Upper Canada." And in setting apart the fifty-seven rectories in 1836, Sir John Colborne gave final effect to the Simcoe Act of 1791, which provided for the endowment of Church of England rectories in Upper Canada.

The Church and State views, so strenuously put forth by Governor Simcoe and those who surrounded, and those who succeeded, him, took strong hold upon the governing class of those days. They always maintained, as he did, that the Constitutional Act of 1791 provided for a State Church, and that the Act endowed it with reserves and prospective rectories. As the years went on, these views took a practical shape. In 1820, the Executive Government under Sir Peregrine Maitland, established a system of Church of England "National Schools," as in England, without the knowledge or consent of the Legislature of Upper Canada, and four years after that legislature itself had passed a law establishing common schools in every settled township. In 1827 an exclusively Church of England Charter was obtained for the projected King's College. The application for this charter was accompanied by an ecclesiastical Chart—which afterward became very notorious—in which the number of non-episcopal churches, with their members, was dwarfed to insignificance. When the chart reached Upper Canada, in 1828, it raised such an indignant feeling in the country, that the House of Assembly took the matter up, and a report, strongly condemnatory of the chart, was prepared by a select committee of the House, based upon elaborate and conclusive evidence, obtained from over fifty witnesses, including many ministers and lay members of all the Churches. From this evidence Dr. T. D. Morrison prepared a revised and correct chart, and for this, being also a Methodist, he was dismissed from his employment. As a fitting protest against such treatment, Dr. Morrison was elected a member of the House of Assembly, and was afterwards Mayor of Toronto.

The climax of this high-handed and partisan policy was reached in 1831, when, in response to a respectful address from the Methodist Conference, Sir John Colborne reproached its members for their "dislike to any church establishment, or to the particular form of Christianity which is denominated the Church of England." He taunted them "with the accounts of disgraceful dissensions of the Methodist Church and its separatists," and closed by speaking of what he termed the "absurd advice given to the Indians by the Methodist Missionaries," and of their "officious interference." The Indians had already been told by executive sanction "that the Governor did not feel disposed to assist the

Indians, so long as they remained under their present [Methodist] teachers. . . . But should the natives come under the superintendence of the Established Church, then the Government would assist them, as far as lay in their power." *

Into the contests which arose out of the preceding events which I have mentioned, Dr. Ryerson entered with all his heart. In 1826 and 1827, he struck the first blow for right, and for religious freedom, in his review of the Rev. Dr. Strachan's "Sermon on the Death of the first Bishop of Quebec." No one who now reads the youthful replies of this "Methodist Preacher," as he signed himself, to the statements, so depreciatory of the Methodists and all Nonconformists, which that sermon contained, but will be struck with the fact that it was the echo of the thoughts, somewhat turgidly expressed, of his early teachers to which Dr. Ryerson gave utterance in the first series of his replies. As the discussion progressed, and the number of his assailants multiplied, the native energy and the deep thinking of the youthful "Reviewer" asserted themselves; and they then had an impassioned and eloquent utterance all their own.

Thus gradually, and by this process, was slowly maturing the intellect and mental power of the man who was destined to leave his mark upon the early institutions of our land. Although his insight into men and things was somewhat intuitive, yet it was not by any means due to intuition alone that he grasped a situation, mastered a difficulty, or mentally solved the social or civil problems which constantly presented themselves to him in these early years of his life.

In 1828, Dr. Ryerson wrote a second series of letters to the Rev. Dr. Strachan, over his own signature, in regard to the ecclesiastical Chart. These letters were afterward reprinted in pamphlet form, as were also those of 1826-27.

These successive letters, in defence of the rights of non-episcopal churches, raised Dr. Ryerson to an eminence at the time to which no other man had attained, so that when the plans were matured for the establishment of the *Christian Guardian* newspaper, in 1829, Egerton Ryerson was appointed to be its first editor.

In 1832, Dr. Ryerson was deputed to attend the British Conference so as to negotiate a union of the Canadian and British Conferences. He left Canada early in 1833, and was most successful in his mission. On his leaving for England he was entrusted with a petition to the King in favour of the equal rights of all classes of His Majesty's subjects in Upper Canada, and signed by upwards of 20,000 people. In the same year was laid the founda-

*Rev. G. F. Playter's *History of Methodism in Canada* (1862), page 337.

tion stone at Cobourg of the Upper Canada Academy, which was destined, ten years afterwards, to expand into the University of Victoria College, or "Old Vic," as she was lovingly called. On his return to Canada, Dr. Ryerson wrote a series of articles in the *Christian Guardian*, headed "Impressions made by my late visit to England." These "impressions" were violently assailed by Mr. William Lyon Mackenzie and other editors of extreme views, as being too favorable to the public men and institutions of England, and led to a protracted discussion, which had the effect of dividing into two hostile camps the liberals of moderate and extreme views—afterwards known as Reformers and Radicals—the latter of whom precipitated the rebellion of 1837.

In 1835, the financial embarrassments of the Upper Canada Academy necessitated urgent measures being taken to collect funds and to secure a royal charter for the institution, and Dr. Ryerson was appointed to go to England to obtain both.

As a slight digression in this narrative, I may mention that, owing to the persistent efforts of the revolutionary party in Upper Canada to influence the British Parliament against the moderate and law-abiding party in that province, the advocacy of Messrs. Hume and Roebuck, able and prominent members of the House of Commons, was secured. How their efforts were checkmated, Dr. Ryerson himself tells us. He said that "in presenting the Canadian petition, Mr. Hume made an elaborate speech, full of exaggerations and misstatements from beginning to end. I was requested to take a seat under the gallery of the House of Commons, and while Mr. Hume was speaking, I furnished Lord Sandom and Mr. Gladstone with the materials for answers to Mr. Hume's misstatements. Mr. Gladstone's quick perception, with Lord Sandom's promptings, kept the House in a roar of laughter at Mr. Hume's expense for more than an hour; the wonder being how Mr. Gladstone was so thoroughly informed on Canadian affairs. . . . Mr. Hume was confounded and made no reply, and as far as I know, never after spoke on Canadian affairs." Dr. Ryerson followed this up by a series of letters in the *London Times*, signed "A Canadian." The British North American Association of Merchants in London, had these letters reprinted, and a copy of them sent to the members of both Houses of Parliament.

It is unnecessary to dwell further on the stirring events of these troublesome times, in which Dr. Ryerson took his full share as the champion of moderation and of equal rights. It endangered his life, however; and Elders Case and Green and others prevented him from going on from Cobourg to Toronto, on his way from Kingston, for, as Dr. Ryerson states in his "Epochs of Methodism," "it had been agreed by W. L. Mackenzie and his fellow-rebels in

1837 to hang Egerton Ryerson on the first tree they met with, could they apprehend him."

I have referred to the union effected between the British and Canadian Conferences by Dr. Ryerson in 1833. A series of misunderstandings, as well as personal feeling in the English Conference against Dr. Ryerson, brought that union to a close in 1840. The Canadian part of that painful event took place in the old Adelaide Street church. Few only of the older Methodists of to-day will remember the memorable scene in that old church, when so many of the ministers separated themselves from each other, and into two bands,—those who, from old associations and feeling, adhered to the British Conference, and those who remained faithful to the Conference in this country. All were greatly moved, when they bade each other farewell, and many quiet tears were shed. At the close of the Conference, Dr. Ryerson, who had been accused of self-seeking and ambition, delivered a memorable speech in his defence. As he closed, he referred to his disinterested labours for the Church of his youth, and for the Academy, and then quoted, with touching effect, the following words from one of Wesley's hymns—

" No foot of land do I possess,
No cottage in the wilderness ;
A poor wayfaring man."

It would protract this narrative beyond the time assigned to me, were I to go into particulars of Dr. Ryerson's interviews and intercourse with Colonial Ministers, with Lieutenant-Governors and Governors-General, on the affairs and good government of this Province. Nor can I give any details of the speeches, editorials, or other writings of Dr. Ryerson, during the many years of contest for civil and religious freedom, or on the Clergy Reserve and other questions which agitated Upper Canada from 1825 to 1840. The *Christian Guardian*, the general newspaper press, and the records of the House of Assembly, contain ample proof of the severity of the protracted struggle, which finally issued in the establishment, on a secure foundation, of the religious and denominational privileges and freedom which we now enjoy. To the Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists and others, who joined with the Methodist leaders in the prolonged struggle, the gratitude of the country must ever be due.*

* In his "Epochs of Methodism," page 164, Dr. Ryerson says: "But the burthen of that great struggle, together with the reproaches, abuse, and, in some instances, persecutions, had to be borne by the Methodists, who—laymen and ministers—were a unit in the contest for equal rights and privileges in behalf of all religious denominations." See also pages 101 and 212 of "The Story of My Life."

I now turn from contemplating Dr. Ryerson as one of the foremost champions, in his day, of the civil and religious rights of his countrymen. People of the present day chiefly regard him as the founder of a system of popular education, which, under his hand, became the pride and glory of Canadians. This, however, is but a partial view of what he did for his country. When he assumed office in 1844, the brunt of the battle was practically over. He had been actively engaged in the struggle for twenty years, and victory was then assured to the combatants on the side in which he had been a conspicuous leader.

It was in his position as President of Victoria College, that the practical and sympathetic sides of his character shone out so brightly. On these points I can speak from personal knowledge, for I was at Victoria College for four years, and during the whole time of Dr. Ryerson's incumbency there. The motive, on which he unconsciously acted, and which had influenced himself in early life, was the one which moved him as President of the College; and which, in every form, he sought to impress upon his students. In its concentrated form it was embodied in these ancient words:

"IN SCIENTIA EXCELLERE PULCHRUM EST; SED NESCIRE TURPE."

It was with such a motto that he appealed to every young man who entered college; and he himself gave practical proof of it, by his own diligent study, and his mastery of the subjects which he taught to the students. He had the happy faculty, too, of investing these subjects with somewhat of a personal character, and with a reality such as might have the effect of practically influencing the after career of the student. Thus he modernized Grecian and Roman history, and sought to find parallels in the past for the events of modern times. History, in his hands, was shown to indeed repeat itself; and teaching of this kind tended to fix and fasten the disjointed facts of general history on the mind and memory of the student.

We will now speak of the silent yet potent influence of the President in forming and fixing the religious character of young men at Victoria College. ESTO PERPETUA; may such an influence ever be potent in this University!—I shall not theorize upon this subject. I shall speak of it particularly as it affected myself as a student, and many others with me. What struck me particularly at the time was the perfect oneness of spirit and feeling which characterized the social and religious gatherings of the students and teachers alike. President, professor and student felt themselves, when in that atmosphere, to be all alike children of the same Father, and in the presence of Him who is "no respecter of persons" in

Christian worship and service. It was indeed there that the President revealed the unaffected simplicity of his Christian character, the tender sympathy of his loving heart, and the helpful nature of his religious experience, as expressed in his suggestive counsels and practical advice. In his personal religious influence among the students, it might truly be said of him, as Goldsmith has said of the "Village Preacher":

"He watched and prayed and felt for all . . .
He tried each art, reproved each dull delay,
Allured to brighter worlds—and, led the way!"

There has often come back to me a striking example of the potency of the silent religious influences of Victoria College in those days. Among our students was a large-hearted and kindly young fellow, but somewhat of an exclusive Episcopalian. He never would come to any of the voluntary religious meetings in the College. After I left Cobourg I lost sight of him for many years. Happening to be in the neighbourhood of his former home, I asked about him, and was told that he was then one of the most devoted evangelists among lumbermen and destitute settlers. All at once, (knowing the man as I did,) the truth flashed upon me, and I said, "Ah, the germ of that new life, silent as it was, and unresponsive as it remained at the College, had at length asserted its vitality, and had borne this precious fruit." I recalled many incidents which assured me that I was right in my surmise. It also recalled a somewhat parallel case of a young soldier enlisted in the Federal Army, and leaving home with his mother's teaching in his heart, and his mother's blessing upon his head. The story is touchingly told in a few verses which I shall quote. They show how, that, in the young soldier's case, as in that of the student, the silent influence of the "alma mater," and the tender love of the soldier's mother were identical in their effective power for good. No doubt, the sweet and softened melody of the good old Methodist hymns, wafted up to his quiet room in the College, came back to the student with tenfold force in after years, and flowed out again from a heart "making melody" in itself, and attuned to higher things.

The soldier-incident is thus told:

Beneath the hot midsummer sun,
The men had marched all day;
And now beside a rippling stream
Upon the grass they lay.

Tiring of games and idle jests,
As swept the hours along,
They called to one who mused apart,
"Come, friend, give us a song."

"I fear I cannot please," he said;
"The only songs I know
Are those my mother used to sing
For me, long years ago."

"Sing one of those," a rough voice cried,
"There's none but true men here;
To every mother's son of us
A mother's songs are dear."

Then sweetly rose the singer's voice
 Amid unwonted calm,
 "Am I a soldier of the cross,
 A follower of the Lamb?"
 "And shall I fear to own His cause?"—
 The very stream was stilled,
 And hearts that never throbbed with
 fear
 With tender thoughts were filled.
 Ended the song; the singer said,
 As to his feet he rose,
 'Thanks to you all, my friends; good-
 night,
 God grant us sweet repose."
 "Sing us one more," the captain
 begged;
 The soldier bent his head,
 Then glancing round, with smiling lips,
 "You'd join with me," he said,

"We'll sing this old familiar air,
 Sweet as the bugle call,
 'All hail the power of Jesus' name,
 Let angels prostrate fall.'"
 Ah! wondrous was the old tune's spell
 As on the singer sang.
 Man after man fell into line,
 And loud the voices rang!
 ———
 The songs are done, the camp is still,
 Naught but the stream is heard;
 But ah! the depths of every soul
 By those old hymns are stirred.
 And up from many a bearded lip,
 In whispers soft and low,
 Rises the prayer the mother taught
 The boy long years ago!

As to the later life-work of Dr. Ryerson, I can only make a brief reference. Noted as he was as a skilful controversialist in the momentous questions which were agitated in his early days, yet his fame will ever rest upon the fact that he founded a great system of public education for this Province. In doing so, he had to encounter unusual difficulties. He had to fight many a battle, but it was with men brought up in the Old Land, and also with foreign ecclesiastics. And he never had to cross swords in these contests but with one Canadian, and that one is now a non-resident of this country. The soil in which he had to sow his seed was unpropitious, the country was somewhat unprepared. English ideas of "schools for the poorer classes" prevailed. Free schools were unknown, almost unheard of; and when proposed, were denounced as an "invasion of the rights of property;" while the leading newspaper of the day assailed them as "downright robbery." Yet all these difficulties were overcome in time, and free schools are now a universal heritage. Handsome school-houses, able inspectors, and good teachers are everywhere to be found; and all rejoice that the great problem of Public Education has been so successfully solved in this Province, and that too by one of her own sons, born upon her own soil.

In a touching letter which Dr. Ryerson wrote to me, for he could not trust himself to speak, when, for the last time, he left the office in February, 1876, where we had so often conferred together, he thus summarized what had been accomplished:

"We have laboured together with a single eye to promote the best interests of our country, irrespective of religious sect, or political party, to

devise, develop and mature a system of instruction, which embraces and provides for every child in the land a good education . . . and which makes provision, whereby Municipal Councils and Trustees can provide suitable accommodation, teachers and facilities for imparting education and knowledge to the rising generation of the land."

Even after he left office his heart was in the work, and he yearned for a time to be again labouring as of old. Writing to me from England, at the close of 1876, he said :

" Had the Government allowed us to work as we had done in former years, and sustained us, we would have done great things for our country ; and I could have *died* in the harness with you. But it was not to be. . . I have no doubt it will be seen that the hand of God is in this, as it has been in all of our work for more than thirty years."

As a foremost Canadian who has served his country well, we are all proud of him !

The career of such a man deserves to be held up as worthy of study and imitation, especially in those heroic acts of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice in the defence of our civil and religious rights, and in the noble qualities of endurance and far-sightedness of the Christian statesman, which he displayed in performing the great work of his life.

The pressure on the young men of the present day, and their nervous anxiety to launch into active life, unfits them for the practice of that severe self-discipline, and mastery of principles, which was so marked a characteristic of Dr. Ryerson. It also leaves little time for the study of the career of such a man as he was. This is their loss, and indirectly, it is a loss to the country ; for in this day of restless change, we require thoughtful men, men well-furnished as was he, and also that heroic man, the Rev. Dr. Douglas, in all of those higher gifts which are largely the result of study, of reading, and of intelligent observation.

A distinguished career at college, without these, is not enough ; for have we not often been grievously disappointed to see so many men, who take first-class honours in universities, utterly fail to make their mark in after life, simply, in many cases, because they have only cultivated a part of their powers, and were content to "rest upon their oars," and to be satisfied with what proved to be the ephemeral honours won at college ; and thus they have left their intellectual powers unbalanced, untrained and undisciplined, and the end is disappointment and failure.

I have a few words personal to Dr. Ryerson and myself to say in conclusion :

For over forty years, I enjoyed the personal friendship of the distinguished man whose memory we honour here this evening,

thirty-two years of which were passed in active and pleasant service under him.

As the head of a Department, he had the rare gift of attaching to himself all of those who served under him. He differed also from many other heads of Departments, in that, (metaphorically speaking,) he never assumed to be such a Colossus in power and strength, or such a Solon in wisdom and foresight, as to have achieved all the success which marked his administration. He took pride in "rendering to all their dues," and especially, "honour to whom honour." He was not a man to be absorbed in details. He felt that his place was on the watch-tower of observation, so as to be able to survey the whole educational field; and whatever he saw was good and excellent elsewhere, to incorporate it in our school system. Hence, it is to-day composite in its character, and embodies in its structure most of what is valuable in other systems. It therefore rests upon a broad and solid foundation; and in its main features it is destined to last for many years as the pride and glory of this young country.

I have spoken of Dr. Ryerson's desire for engaging in his old work. After his last return from England, however, he spoke but seldom on that subject, and then only with a feeling of regret, for he knew that it could never be. Finally, he would but rarely allow me to speak of his old life-work, as it was now in other hands. It was only when he thought that events affected me in any way, that he would refer to the subject; and then his face would light up and he would express himself as though we were once more together in the Department. As time went on, I could see that he was failing, and that "the strong man was bowed down," and that he began to droop. I often tried, by referring to active and pleasant incidents in the past, to cheer the noble old man; but, as I did so, I felt an overwhelming sadness, for the old time fire and interest in them were gone, and the end was slowly, but surely, coming. Then indeed, "the joy of the Lord," as of old, was his strength, and he even rejoiced that the end was near.

At length, on one quiet Sunday morning in February, 1882, as I and others sat at his bedside, he peacefully passed away; and nothing remained to us then but the silent form of one of Canada's noblest sons and one of the greatest of her children.
